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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [SENV](#) [EIND](#) [EC](#)  
SUBJECT: GALAPAGOS NATIONAL PARK DIRECTOR FIRING MAY  
THREATEN CONSERVATION EFFORTS

Classified By: CONSUL GENERAL DOUGLAS GRIFFITHS FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND  
(D)

11. (C) SUMMARY: Minister of the Environment Marcela Aguinaga fired Galapagos National Park (GNP) Director Raquel Molina in early March, alleging in the press that Molina was not adequately protecting the park. In reality, the committed but abrasive park director's repeated clashes with Aguinaga and Galapagos Governor Eliecer Cruz over balancing economic activities in the islands with environmental protection sealed her fate. Molina brought a tough and legalistic approach to protecting this unique ecosystem, fearlessly taking on powerful and entrenched fishing and tourism operators. Ironically, although Molina has brought much needed stability to the park and significantly increased patrolling and enforcement activities, the minister may be setting her up as the scapegoat if Ecuador fails to get the Galapagos off of UNESCO's Threatened World Heritage list in July. Her as yet unknown replacement in the GNP is likely to be much less of an obstacle to economic interests in the islands, signaling a tough road ahead for those trying to protect the Galapagos. END SUMMARY.

ENVIRONMENT MINISTER SACKS GALAPAGOS PARK DIRECTOR  
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12. (U) In the first week of March, Minister of the Environment Marcela Aguinaga flew to the Galapagos and announced to Galapagos National Park (GNP) officials that she was removing Park Director Raquel Molina from her post after nearly two years in the job. She cited Molina's supposed inability to "adapt to the daily routines of the job and the ministry's priorities". Aguinaga also specifically accused Molina of failing to implement adequate controls over the Galapagos Marine Reserve. The minister subsequently appointed Sixto Naranjo, a park official, as acting director. Under park norms, the next director should be chosen in accordance with strict technical criteria ) the same method used to select Molina.

13. (C) Former Park Director Molina fired back at Aguinaga in the local press a week later, noting that the minister had not expressed any displeasure with her performance a month earlier, when Molina presented her annual report to the Galapagos Cooperators Table. "But now I am the worst to her?" Molina wondered. She also defended her record in protecting the marine reserve, pointing to statistics showing increased patrols and more administrative actions taken against illegal tourism and fishing activities under her watch. Molina was the first GNP director in the past five years to make it through a full calendar year without being replaced. She later told Consul General Griffiths that she

was holding back "explosive information" about the minister's conduct, in anticipation of future attacks by Aguinaga.

#### REAL ISSUE MOLINA'S REFUSAL TO GO ALONG WITH IMPROPER ACTS

14. (C) According to insiders and Molina herself, Molina's true crime was not incompetence; instead, it was her unwillingness to turn a blind eye to corruption and unlawful activities in the park. Deborah Chiriboga, a well known local environmental activist, told Poloff that Aguinaga removed Molina after the former GNP director openly questioned her decision to allow a 48-passenger tourist ship to operate using two 16-passenger permits assigned to other boats. According to park documents, a national tourism company, Metropolitan Touring, owned by Roque Sevilla, entered into an agreement with two local operators allowing Sevilla's company to use their permits. The three parties asked the GNP to bless the arrangement in late November 2007. The GNP refused, citing park regulations prohibiting single ships from bundling together multiple permits.

15. (C) The three operators subsequently complained to the Ministry of the Environment. They returned to Molina on February 25 with another letter asking for GNP approval. One day later, Molina received a Ministry of the Environment resolution ordering her to approve the request. Parts of this document were identical to passages in the companies' February 25 letter. Molina responded to Aguinaga the following week, refusing to comply with the order and noting that the tourism operators appeared to "already know the contents of the resolution, which causes the GNP directorate to worry about how some issues are handled in the Ministry." Coincidentally, the tourism company's general manager told

the Consul General on February 26 that the company was introducing a large new vessel into the Galapagos. When the Consul General expressed surprise, the manager replied that "everything's been arranged in Quito".

16. (C) Minister Aguinaga confirmed to USAID staff that she and Molina disputed the permit, but firmly denied that this was the ultimate cause of the dismissal, further asserting that the permit is legal. She indicated that a letter to her from Molina "that could be the basis of a libel suit" was really the last straw.

17. (U) President Rafael Correa has ordered the GNP to replace commercial tour operating permits with a concession system for visitor services. Aguinaga and Correa have reportedly imposed a May 1 deadline for a draft concession plan.

#### LAST OF MANY CLASHES BETWEEN GNP DIRECTOR AND AUTHORITIES

18. (C) While the fight over the boating permits ultimately got her fired, it was not the first time that committed conservationist Molina butted heads with economic interests in the Galapagos. Since being named GNP director in May 2006, Molina repeatedly clashed with tourism companies, Galapagos fishing communities, local authorities, the Ecuadorian navy, and at times, the central government over illegal fishing and tourism in the islands. As a result of her unwillingness to compromise her principles, she had many enemies amongst those looking to exploit the economic opportunities the islands offer. Minister Aguinaga complained of Molina's failure to constructively engage local governments and the private sector. Molina herself recognized that her days were numbered when Correa appointed Minister Aguinaga, with whom Molina had frequently clashed when Aguinaga had a private legal practice representing Galapagos tour operators, including Metropolitan Touring.

19. (C) Chiriboga believes that Molina's fate was sealed in late February when GNP officials stopped a 21-person Panamanian boat that was illegally fishing in the islands. A fish processor owned by the president of Guayaquil's Chamber

of Fisheries had contracted the boat. According to Chiriboga, Aguinaga was outraged by the action but unable to do anything about it once the press caught wind of it. "She came to the GNP to yell at Raquel," Chiriboga explained. "During the meeting, Aguinaga received a call and told the caller, 'I cannot do anything about this anymore because the GNP already has the boat's exact coordinates.'" Molina was also physically assaulted last year when she and other park officials tried to prevent navy personnel from allowing illegal activities in the park.

#### ANOTHER VICTORY FOR ECONOMIC INTERESTS IN THE GALAPAGOS

¶10. (C) COMMENT: Without a strong replacement ) an unlikely outcome at this point ) Molina's firing will be a blow to efforts to preserve the Galapagos's special ecology and a victory for those who push for more economic development in the islands. For years, Ecuador has struggled to balance economic and environmental concerns in the Galapagos. Despite clear legal limits on the number of fishing licenses, boat permits and resident visas issued in the Galapagos, corruption has allowed many to skirt the regulations, and resulting environmental consequences have been terrible. Although not always an experienced administrator, Molina had a rare reputation for honesty and cared passionately about protecting the environment in the Galapagos. Her willingness to take on anyone and her refusal to compromise her principles made her an important counterweight to those representing the islands' economic interests. But it was this same inflexibility and hard-headedness that led to her downfall. With local interests largely dominated by short-term economic development, the GNP director is one of the few people on the islands focused on defending the Galapagos ecosystem. If the new director is not as committed to environmental protection as Molina, the islands' future may indeed be in danger.

GRIFFITHS